Some Excerpts from

“MEMORABLE FANCIES”

by

Minor White

Excerpts From Minor White's "Memorable Fancies"

Tragedy that is too great to bear can be expressed in a photograph by inanimate objects in the setting instead of people.

Languages communicate ideas, emotions, attitudes, desires, and intentions by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols.

The analysis of the process of communication is partly psychological.

Visual dissonance is defined as a state of psychological tension caused when one experiences a disparity between what one expects to see and what one actually sees. The concept is related to a well-known phenomenon in social psychology called cognitive dissonance, which happens when we perceive a discrepancy between our attitudes and our behavior. Our eyes see the world of art with a thousand expectations based on our personality and our cognitive structure (knowledge system). Sometimes those expectations are fulfilled, sometimes not. In the case of unfulfilled expectations, the viewer is required to resolve his or her tension, or simply to abandon the piece and consider another.

The technique of producing unexpected visual forms is widely practiced by modern artists, who seek to gain our attention, and further intellectual effort, as we attempt to reconcile our expectations with what we see.

Much of art has been purposely designed to generate a form of creative tension in the viewer that cries out for resolution. In many forms of classic art, the artist presented social issues that embarrassed the establishment, while many contemporary artists present visual statements about art, religion, psychoanalysis, as well as social conditions. All of these are intended to motivate the thinking person to find a deeper message in the art. These disturbing art forms demand active participation in the construction of "reality."

Psychoanalysis has taught us better to comprehend not only that obscurity and ambiguity have an artistic value of their own, but also some of the reasons why, as Coleridge formulated it, “poetry gives more pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood.”

A picture may be a portrayal of inner confusion. At other times the various elements can be seen as the personifications or images of the elements which are destroying the conscious control of the maker. When there is an intuitive connection with the images of the unconscious, but a lack of integration in the conscious life, this condition will show itself in pictures.

The mathematician Kline wrote about early Christian and medieval artists: “...They were content to paint in symbolic terms, that is, their settings and subjects were intended to illustrate religious themes and induce religious feelings rather than to represent real people in the actual and present world. The people and objects were highly stylized and drawn as though they existed in a flat, two dimensional vacuum. Figures that should be behind one another were usually alongside or above. Stiff draperies and angular attitudes were characteristic. The backgrounds of the paintings were almost always of a solid color, usually gold, as if to emphasize that the subjects had no connection with the real world.”

That sort of description of medieval art seems true enough to us: essentially, I think that it is true; but it also leaves out of the account the degree to which the medieval painting was a depiction of ‘the real world’ as the medieval painter conceived it. Certainly, medieval painting is highly conventionalized, but then, as we have seen, outline and perspective are themselves conventions. (Space in medieval paintings is expressive of the way in which men and women felt themselves to be within their world.) We must therefore be careful when we say that the medieval painter worked ‘in symbolic terms.’ Such statements are not entirely untrue. However, they greatly over-emphasize the degree to which the painter conceived of the ‘real’ world in one way and then turned away from it and set about painting another ‘unreal’ or ‘religions’ world of symbol.

The medieval painter made much less distinction between internal and external space than did the Renaissance painters. Religious cosmology was effectively the institutionalized version of a projection of a subjective space into a real world. Up there, you have the good heaven with its sustaining and nurturing deities; down there, the bad hell into which all one's own evil, destructive and aggressive impulses can be projected. The 'real world' is no more an integral part of this system, which is freely peopled with 'good' and 'bad' creatures representing benign impulses, and hooved and cloven ones standing for bad.

The Renaissance changed that. To persist with our extravagant generalizations, the Renaissance involved that sifting out of mind from matter, of self from other, the recognition of space, distance and separateness. Conventional means were found for the introduction of the third dimension, that is, the rendering of recessive space, of distance, volume, mass, and visual effects. (Perspective was re-created.)

Certainly, Cezanne's work poses a new kind of relationship between the observer and the observed: It is with Cezanne that we begin to be made aware that what I see depends upon where I am and when. He shows us a landscape in a state of change and becoming, from the point of view of an observer who is no longer assumed to be frozen and motionless in time and space. Cezanne mingled a subjective with an objective conception of space—but he does so playfully and in an explorative rather than a dogmatically decreed fashion.

In abstract art, it was suggested by Bion that such geometrical concepts as lines, points, and space derived originally not from a realization of three-dimensional space but from the realization of the emotional life. Space is considered by Bion to be where depression, or some other emotion, used to be. In such cases, the process of projection of parts of the self takes place in a mental space which has no visual images to fulfill the function of a co-ordinate system. The mental realization of space is therefore felt as an immensity so great that it cannot be represented even by astronomical space because it cannot be represented at all.

The main difference between artist and patient is this: the mentally-ill individual is solipsistic and expresses his own inner feelings: the artist's work has societal meaning that evokes significant reaction in the audience. Although the viewer's response may be heightened by a painter who suffers from deep inner conflicts, his work will be ruined if his personality disintegrates beyond a certain point. It is believed that the great artist, involved in his own conflicts, can free himself from the immediacy of their personal significance and transform them into a format that evokes consonant feelings in the observer.

A sequence of photographs is like a cinema of stills. A cinema arrested at the high points and which lock the story to the memory. Each image is economical because of what has led to it and what it leads into. Each contains the thrust of forward movement as well as the foundation of what has happened. The gaps between pictures are as important as the images, tho they have to be filled by the reader from what he can grasp of the intentions of the artist, the implications of the subject, the implications of the treatment. Abstraction in photography is to reach towards the non-objective without ever breaking camera's strongest point—the magic of its tether to visual reality.

"Memorable Fancies" April 20, 1960 San Francisco
...There are moments and hours when the activity of photographing is out of my hands, when I act in the power of an outside force.

"Memorable Fancies" December 31, 1952 San Francisco
...The camera must report a revitalization. It must revitalize an experience. Somehow it must bring the poetic experience to the surface. It must report a revitalization of a personality if it is to achieve full stature. The camera-conscious portrait is a first step. A step beyond the candid, the caught, the person photographed unaware. The candid is an experiment that had to be fully explored. I fell that for me it is a dead end.

Revitalization—what is meant by this term? If I make photographs of rocks, it is in human terms, in two ways human terms. First, the photo is reminiscent of human anatomy or human emotions, tho the rocks themselves are no such thing. Second, the photo is a stimulus to a human being which can cause him to dream of his mistress, his wife, his mother—not of rocks. If I photograph human beings it must be the same. The man, as he is, is not recorded—or only in part—but the camera records the experience between two people, the atmosphere or rapport is apparent. The rapport itself is made visible. When it is, then the spectator can enter to some degree the experience of rapport too. When it is not, the spectator makes an intellectual appraisal of personality, situation, what have you.

Somehow photographs must be more than the recording—tho it does this superbly well—but it must be giving. Giving of ll the maturity, stature, intellect, spirit and love that is the photographer. A few will be able to do this. Only a few are required.

Letter to Helmut Gernsheim September 4, 1933 San Francisco
...Likewise the photograph, the image can be seen to mean different things to us at different times—and since we project our feelings we say that the photograph changes its meaning.

"Memorable Fancies" March, 1958 Rochester
...I now seek, not things as they are but what else they are, those objective patterns of tension between surface experiences, which are also true. It is a shift from a belief in the Essence as an absolute belief to a belief to as near observable truth. Yet of the alternatives, it can report what else things are. It can even report what else things might be and in so doing invent much as the painter invents. And in so doing cause photographs that depend so little on the object photographed as to be (for all practical purposes) an original source of experience.

Of the following photos, which is true is hard to say—do they partake more of sources—search for patterns of behavior—do they penetrate beneath facts & give a feeling that there are layers of fluctuating patterns with surfaces & values. Or do they partake of present day art's search for creation of original experience.

...For Minor White “recognition triggered exposure”. When working thus, unconsciousness of the subject is little more than an awareness of importance, but not the content.

The previsualization of the picture is in terms of tones most and content least. This moment, the period of seeing the picture and exposure, has an element of blank for me. (Like the Zen Archer, something takes over.)

“Memorable Fancies” October 20, 1938 Rochester

...”Creative photography hangs on the faith that outsides reveal insides.” Then I meant that photographed surfaces must reveal the essences of objects, places, persons and situations. Since then I know the opposite to be also true, photographs of rocks, water, hands, peeling paint or weathered fences consent to mirror my own inner occasions. Hence, in photographing things for what else they are, I can go either towards myself or away from myself.